



Invention: Understanding the Relationship between Sensation, Perception and Concept Formation

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would sneak in a ditto with awkward sentences from their papers or with whole passages to rework in class. At times I would have students read entire papers aloud, and we would discuss the ideas and the organization of those ideas. For a while, though, the composition side of the course was definitely getting slighted. Questions about one book would lead to similar problems in another book, and the class wanted to talk about SF literature in general. Nevertheless, I found opportunities at various points to relate SF to other works of literature. For example, in one story, "Mimsy were the Borogoves" by Lewis Padgett, the class found it difficult to believe that children might know more than adults—so I brought in a few lines from Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode*. At another point, the class had difficulty understanding Vonnegut's sense of humor—so we compared it to Swift's "Modest Proposal." In general, I suspended my own critical judgments and let the students in the class confront each other on the issues which they raised. For a while, I became an instigator rather than a teacher; I prodded the class with questions rather than giving my own answers. It became my policy to withhold my interpretation and to let the students carry their own discussions. Then, when different reactions to the same material led to a search for the sources of those reactions in the text, my training in literature came in handy. The important difference was that they came to me for interpretative answers when they were ready instead of listening to me first and then trying to "please" me with the "right" answers in their papers.

Eventually, we could return to the problems of composition on common ground. Once the students had gained confidence in their abilities to state their own ideas, they began to see (some more obscurely than others) that they also needed to find the right vehicle for expressing these ideas. Then, topics such as organization, coherence, and logic became more relevant to them. They learned that the ideas expressed in fiction must be reworked to fit the medium of the essay; thus, the study of paragraphing, sentence structure, and punctuation began to make more sense. To a few, these studies led to a concern for proper methods of research and documentation. Of

course, the majority of the students never developed a real love for the elements of composition, but at least they were no longer bored with them. They were able to admit openly by the end of the quarter that writing was often a very frustrating experience for them but that, when they really wanted to say something, the frustration was worth it.

The class convinced me that SF works well as a stimulus for topics which students want to write about. Part of the reason it works so well in this respect is that it is a literature that belongs to the students first and to the teachers second. More traditional kinds of reading material often deal with similar issues, but SF, by giving free rein to the imagination, embraces current social concerns in a readily accessible style. Furthermore, SF is an interdisciplinary hybrid. Students who have shunned English courses in the past in favor of the physical, biological, or social sciences discover that the ideas they have encountered in their respective fields are often the bases for literary speculation in SF. Thus, they gain respect for SF in particular and for other kinds of writing in general.

Recently, there have been efforts made to treat SF with much more critical respect (such new periodicals as *Science-Fiction Studies* from Indiana State University are signs that times are changing), but I hope that we don't rush ahead so quickly to claim new territory for literary criticism that we forget its roots in popular literature. These roots give it immense vitality among the students themselves. Their taste may not be as "refined" as ours, but SF really gets them to *think* about their future in a complex industrialized society. Such a find should not be scorned by any teacher.

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INVENTION: UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SENSATION, PERCEPTION AND CONCEPT FORMATION

Over the past several years, I have become increasingly aware that my students do not look directly at their world. In their

classroom discussions and in their writing, they tend to rely on conventional interpretations of experience as embodied in clichés or the language of others. That is, all too often they put their trust in learned responses, what they assume to be the language of the classroom. To counter this tendency of students to think, talk, and write in clichés, a colleague, Jack Kilgerman, and I devised a course of study which would, first, seek to make the students conscious of their own cognitive processes, moving from sensation (the sensory awareness of a given experience) to perception (the selecting of certain stimuli from that experience) to concept formation (the structuring of these various selections into a coherent, in the sense of communicable, whole). Secondly, the course would point out the necessary and important connection between perception and language, and by "language" I mean grammar as well as semantics. Thirdly, it would demonstrate how an understanding of the perceptual process facilitates good writing by teaching the students how to discover what they have to say about a given topic and also that what they say is worthwhile.

I begin by presenting exercises in class which are designed to disrupt the students' expectations of what should happen in any given experience. This seems a natural starting place, since their preconceptions are often structured by clichés which keep the students from directly seeing and participating in the experience. For example, I found that a classroom, no matter the subject, was often perceived by my students in terms of their reactions to a particular instructor and the information that he was conveying. The variety of reactions are numerous, ranging from delight to boredom, but they were always limited by the students' expectations of what constituted *class*. In an attempt to break down this concept and to show the possibility of redefining it, I asked the students to act out modified *Happenings* in class. In these, each student performs an action, such as tying and untying his shoe, that is seemingly irrelevant to the business of the class as well as unrelated to the actions of the other students. After discussing the *Happening*, the students soon discovered that the unrelated actions were only an exaggeration of

the normal activity of the classroom, namely the infinite shufflings, gesturings, and fidgetings which are often deleted from their concept of *class*. I am not advocating that, while in class, students should constantly be on the look-out for the tying and untying of shoe laces; but, rather, I am advocating that students should be conscious that their notion of *class*—like every other experience they have—is composed of a chaos of stimuli from which they select and order certain features. This process of selection, which is usually unconscious, is called perception; and it can be highly creative and self-fulfilling when students understand what has influenced the selection and so determined the resulting structure.

It is possible to present many variations of the *Happening* exercise, each intended to place side by side radically different actions which have no apparent cause-and-effect relationship and each forcing the student to look beyond his preconception of what is supposed to happen. Students could look at photographs of surrealist art, such as Meret Oppenheim's sculptures, Christo's wrapped projects, Magritte's paintings, or Atget's photographs. They could read selections—almost any would do—from *Alice in Wonderland*; or, in perhaps the ultimate *Happening* experience, they could go watch Marx Brothers' movies. One such variation that I have always enjoyed is Gisele Prasin's short story "Arrogant Hair":

A child who was very hot entered the room which he smelled up with his mouldy hair. He thought it appropriate to ask me the price of a jug which stood on a shelf in the entrance hall. But I told him his nephew would be very happy if he freed his head.

With a suspicious look he said: "Are they nasty, the swallows?"

Shortly after, another child appeared. From his bare stomach hung a hard, cylindrical thing, that gave him the appearance of a fugitive.

He sat next to the other one and said to him: "You have mouldy hair." Then, while cleaning the tip of his red shoe, he threw me one of those little leather balls with which both had their hands filled.

I turned to look at the window. During that time undoubtedly someone came in. It

must have been a little girl, for I heard her teeth cracking a nut shell. When I turned around, I saw a little girl holding green nuts between her teeth. She looked at me, then, holding the first child tightly with her yellow hands, she said to me: "His hair must be mouldy, for I found a tiny wood shaving on the landing." Soon after one heard a slight grating noise. It was the second child crying, while looking at his playmate's hair.

When I woke there were no more children. But on the carpet lay a bandaged male foot, some mouldy hair, and some nuts.

Children are afraid of idols.¹

The story is pure nonsense, but so many elements in it lead the students to expect that it means something. That is, each sentence is grammatically correct, logical, and perfectly understandable; and the writer is very careful about the use of transitional words and phrases, which imply a relationship between the sentences. Yet it is impossible to discover any logical relationship or connection beyond the grammatical one. Even the notion of dream as a structure is negated by the "bandaged male foot, some mouldy hair, and some nuts," which the *I* of the story finds upon waking. As a result of their expectations not being fulfilled, the students are forced to forget about meaning and, instead, to concentrate on how the grammar and syntax of the story create the illusion of meaning.

Once the students begin to look beyond their preconceptions, once they begin to examine their clichés, the next step is to focus on the connection between perception and concept formation. To accomplish this transition, I have used a set of exercises which starts by presenting the students with the relatively simple sense experience of a single object (this may be an actual object, such as a painted gourd; it may be an object represented in poetry, such as William Carlos Williams' "Queen-Ann's Lace" or Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Underwear"; or it may be an object reproduced in a photograph). In each case, the students are asked to describe the object, to write down their descriptions, and then to read them to

the class. As might be expected, each of the students' descriptions of the same object is noticeably different, primarily because each of the students uses different criteria of selectivity. By understanding these criteria, the students can see how the mind moves back and forth between the concrete and the more abstract, how it constantly makes connections between itself and the world around it.

In a more complex set of exercises, I asked the students to look at an object placed in an environment, both actually and in terms of photographs and poems—for example, Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar"—and to describe the relationship between the two. At all times, the students were to consider to what extent they saw the object "commenting on" the environment and vice versa. To get a better idea of what I mean, here is a description, written by one of my students, on a green bottle in a public park:

I am in the park and a bottle is standing up on the fountain ledge. The fountain is not running right now. It's a green bottle with a long thin top and then becomes fat at the bottom. It has a label on it. From the bench I can't make out what it says, but it's written in red. It's amazing how many people pass it by and nobody touches it. I've just noticed it has small crevices in the glass. You can't see through the bottle because the glass is so thick. The bottle reminds me of a girl I once knew. This girl was skinny on top and fat on the bottom. I think I'll call the bottle Susan. Susan's label is not directly facing me. Its label is toward my left side. Get a load of this—after all this time a well dressed black man asked a boy sitting next to the bottle if it was his. The boy replied no and the man threw it into a rusty yellow trash can.

The number of factors that mediate between the bottle and the writer's response to it are many; but they all grow out of a certain awareness which helps him, first, to notice the distinction between a concept and the experience of a specific object—that is, between *bottle* and the specific bottle that he is looking at; second, to describe in detail the physical appearance of the object, selecting those features which strike him as im-

¹ Reprinted from *Surrealism*, ed. Julien Levy (New York: Arno Press, 1968), by permission of Julien Levy.

portant; and, third, to formulate questions about those features which may lead to an understanding of his reasons for selecting them and for rejecting others.

So what does all of this have to do with language and, more specifically, with the structuring and communicating of perception in writing? All of these exercises could serve as the basis for a theme assignment or a journal assignment, but more important they provide a foundation from which to examine how language, operating through grammar, syntax, and semantics, helps to structure and, thus, communicate perception. To illustrate this point, that there is an apparent and comprehensible link between invention and composition, I had my

students walk down a busy commercial street and write down twenty-five observations, in the form of sentences or phrases which they thought characterized the street. My assumptions were that their perceptions, the selection of the twenty-five details, would be unified grammatically, syntactically, and semantically and that the principles underlying these unities would serve to distinguish one set of observations from another. A major advantage of this exercise is that in attempting to comprehend these unities, we—the students and I—would actually be studying those essential, and usually forbidding, aspects of language in an organic way. Here, for example, are two typical sets of observations:

(A)

bank
supermarket
cleaners
automat
Chicken Delight
five-and-dime store
hair dresser
newspaper stand
bowling alley
bar
pizza
cigarette machine
YMCA
library
subway
taxicab driver
cop
traffic light
advertisement
fire hydrant
hippie
overfilled garbage can
bum
queer
city tree

(B)

a smelly cuchifritos shop
Xmas lights
jewelry store
a pizza man slicing a pie
a pair of panty hose pinned sloppily on a wall
a girl yelling "Mario"
yellow Mustang
an autumn leaf mixed with some garbage
the color purple on a window display
a guy looking at hunting rifles
jelly apples
a painted-up prostitute on Simpson Street
scanky flick
a pile of garbage near a mailbox
holding hands
soundless music shop
a bull-shitting pursuer
delivery of early edition of newspaper
old pair of combat boots abandoned in the middle of the street
a runned over paper bag
a gray-haired man closing shop
a little girl with a balloon
bubble gum machine
stinking botanica
two drunks in front of a library

The first impression of set (A) is that of an undifferentiated and uninteresting street. To a great extent this impression results from the large number of unmodified nouns—those nouns which appear to be modified, such as "bowling alley" or "cigarette machine," are so common in our language that

they can be regarded as single words. The exception to this pattern of modification is "overfilled garbage can," which serves as a reminder that the other observations are less vivid. Whereas most of the nouns in column (A) refer, in a fairly neutral way, to things and how they function—for ex-

ample, the stand is for newspapers, the alley is for bowling—the last five observations in that column contain the possibility for judgment. The language is colloquial; the words are highly connotative, bearing with them definite attitudes towards bums, hippies, and queers. Even the phrase “city tree” stands out—trees in the country are not usually referred to as “country trees.” What is being indicated is not so much a tree as the writer’s attitude toward it, for example, the surprise at finding a tree in the city.

In comparison to (A), the observations in (B) are more complex, due in part to the greater complexity of the language. The whole process of modification is more intricate, with information being added to both the right and the left side of the nouns. Also, there seems to be a regular alternation of pleasant, non-objectionable, images with those that are unpleasant and almost seamy. This alternation is underscored by the fact that the pleasant images tend to be composed of rather conventional or standard idioms in simple modification structures; on the other hand, the unpleasant images are colloquial, stimulating the senses and expressing judgments about the nouns they modify. The impression of language expressing judgment and revealing attitude is further created by the literary devices of irony and paradox, so that a music shop is soundless, garbage is next to a mailbox, and two drunks are in front of a library. Finally, the language of the observations conveys the picture of a dynamic, as opposed to a static, street. This sense of motion and activity is a direct product of the colloquial phrases which emphasize the many contradictions of the street experience as well as of the varied use of present and past participles which alternately slow down and speed up the action of the street.

I think that it is clear from these two sets of observations that perception structures itself through language in a very coherent and systematic way. By studying this process, my students could understand not only the way language operates—that is, the difference between the various, syntactic, and semantic constructions—but also its potential for expressing the variety of experience. But no matter where the students go from here, whether writing formal

essays or interpreting the writing of others, the most important thing that they learn from these exercises is an awareness of the way the mind constantly selects from and orders experience, moving between various levels of concretion and abstraction in an attempt to assert itself and make itself a part of the world it sees.

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THE PERSONAL OBITUARY: A BIOGRAPHY OF VALUES

“Minnie Goodwin Died Tuesday,” piped Nancy Nutley (name changed to protect the innocent) to introduce her “current event,” which consisted of the funeral arrangements and date of death, the dates and places of Mrs. Goodwin’s birth and marriage, her current church membership, and a list of survivors’ names and relationships to the deceased.

The rest of our third grade sat in silence, not stunned, just bored. “Why did you choose that?” asked the gentle Miss Collins, our teacher.

Silence.

“Did you know Minnie Goodwin? Was she a relative of yours?”

“No.”

“Was she an important person?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did she do or think anything interesting? unusual? very very bad or very very good?”

Silence. Nancy Nutley had not comprehended the essence of a significant obituary.

But such comprehension is well within the capabilities of college freshmen, as Chet Corey acknowledges in “The Obituary as an Exercise in Living,” CCC (May, 1972), p. 198-199. To write about a death, especially one’s own, is really to write about a life. This Mr. Corey ably recognizes throughout the description of his initial assignment to beginning college freshmen to write their own obituaries, based on the format of a conventional newspaper obituary, with the occupational information and vital statistics the individual student’s own.

However, although Mr. Corey says that this exercise allows the student “time to